Digital Fodder

Affiliate Marketing Software: Which Is Best for Your Program?

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The affiliate marketing software that a company uses is critical to the program's success. Affiliate tracking software must register users, generate links, track link activity, attribute conversions, produce reports, and integrate with payment solutions. Other features merchants may desire are multichannel analytics, messaging, deep linking, fraud detection, and integration with their marketing and business tools. Finally, the software should be reliable, efficient, and foster trust between merchants (advertisers) and affiliates (publishers).

Types of Software

In-House Software

A business can develop in-house affiliate marketing software to use within the organization. In-house affiliate tracking software is uniquely designed to meet the requirements of the merchant. It supports a one-to-many model, i.e., merchant to affiliates. Amazon, Shopify, and TubeBuddy use in-house affiliate marketing apps.

Commercial Software

Commercial affiliate marketing software is available for sale, and there is no shortage of options. Most software developers continually refine and update their apps to offer more features and security. Some, however, remain stagnant

and don't keep pace with industry trends and competitors. Commercial affiliate marketing software supports one-to-many and many-to-many relationships.

Standalone affiliate marketing software provides a one-to-many user interface (UI) for the merchant and a one-to-one UI for the affiliate. The primary advantage of standalone software is it confines the focus of publishers. Case in point, when I log into Shopify's affiliate portal, my focus is on it and it alone. iDevAffiliate, Post Affiliate Pro, and LeadDyno are examples of standalone software.

Affiliate network software—many-to-many—allows affiliates to find and join multiple programs on one site. It's like an online marketplace. For example, ShareASale has 4,500+ merchants, whereas Impact has more than 1,600. On the CJ Affiliate network, I belong to 20+ affiliate programs.

Affiliate networks typically have multiple product categories and subcategories for different industries, sectors, and niches, such as web hosting, clothing, financial, education, and so forth. For an advertiser, the advantages of being on an affiliate network are increased discoverability and visibility by thousands of publishers, some of which might become customers. For publishers, it's convenient to have and manage a wide selection of advertisers in one place.

Some affiliate marketing software developers enable merchants to self-host on their servers, such as iDevAffiliate. For the most part, however, an affiliate program is usually hosted on the app developer's server.

Tracking Technologies

Conversion tracking and attribution are the foundations of affiliate marketing software. If an app provides less than 98 percent reliability, it will be difficult to evaluate affiliate channel results and ROI. For those reasons, advertisers must use software that is robust and efficient. Developers may use multiple tracking technologies to increase tracking integrity. Here are some standard tracking methods.

- Cookie
- Pixel
- Tag
- API
- Postback URL or server-to-server (S2S)
- Digital/device fingerprint
- Internet protocol (IP) address
- Coupon/voucher code

What tracking method is the best? Developers will make a case for the approach they use. However, the optimal tracking method is the one that is reliable under different scenarios, such as ad blockers, Apple's Intelligent Tracking Protocol (ITP), the clearing of browser cookies, and others. Merchants should ask developers about tracking challenges/obstructions and how they resolve those issues.

One tracking method that deserves close attention is third-party cookies. Third-party cookies are under attack by browser software providers, including Apple and Mozilla, which block them by default. Secondly, the nature of third-party cookies is URL redirection, which raises concerns about tracking efficiency.

Affiliate Program Costs

Free affiliate marketing software doesn't exist. The best you'll get are free trials of up to 30 days. Affiliate tracking apps start at $25 a month, and a few exceed $1,000 monthly. Like other goods, "you get what you pay for." For example, some apps have confusing dashboards and unsatisfactory reporting.

Affiliate networks may charge network registration, annual renewal, transaction, override, and overage fees. If transaction fees don't meet a monthly minimum, the merchant must pay the difference. Custom and enterprise plans may be available.

Affiliate marketing software is essential to run a program. Can the same be said about an affiliate marketing manager? Affiliate tracking apps support programs but don't grow them. They don't contact and recruit affiliates, implement growth strategies, or design optimal program signup pages. Those activities, and more, fall in the hands of a marketing manager or agency.

There are two types of affiliate marketing managers. The first type is an administrator who passively manages the program. For instance, she will review, approve, and decline affiliate applications and answer inquiries as they enter her inbox. The second type of manager is a marketer or growth hacker. He will actively develop and implement strategies to grow revenue and partnerships. Case in point, I implement growth strategies to help companies scale their affiliate programs at Partnercade. Unfortunately, many merchants and affiliate

marketing agencies tend to employ administrators who lack marketing education and expertise. Regardless, there's a cost to having somebody manage the program.

Finally, there are affiliate commissions and payment processing costs. Suppose your commission rate is 30 percent per sale. If your average sale is $50, affiliates will receive $15 per transaction—secondly, payment processors including PayPal and Stripe levy fees. Your ROI formula should consider software, staff, and payment fees (paid marketing to promote the program would be an additional expense).

Affiliate Marketing Software

I use 12 to 15 affiliate marketing apps monthly. Some are terrific, while others miss the mark. Here's a shortlist and review of affiliate marketing software providers. Pros and cons are from an agency and affiliate marketer's perspective (my viewpoint), not a merchant. Pricing is based on publicly available data and web archives.

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Affiliate Marketing Software

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Standalone Software

1. iDevAffiliate

iDevAffiliate provides a scalable, feature-rich, and easy-to-use affiliate marketing app. Its features include multiple commission models, customization, reporting, marketing tools, and fraud prevention. It also has plugins for SEO, social media marketing, language packs, geotargeting, QR codes, vanity coupons, and private signup. It integrates with 175 apps for ecommerce, subscription, membership, and payment. iDevAffiliate is one of a few providers that offer a self-hosted option.

- Founded by Jim Webster in 1999
- CEO: Jim Webster
- Headquarters: California, United States
- App integrations: 175
- Free trial: No
- Money-back guarantee: Yes
- Four plans, including self-hosting, cloud, cloud social, and cloud premium
- Starting price: $39 monthly

Pros: affordable, no plan restrictions, customizable, self-hosting option, many features, 175 integrations, and operating for 20+ years

Cons: an out-of-date website and UI

2. FirstPromoter

FirstPromoter is an all-in-one platform that allows SaaS companies to track, manage, and optimize referral-based marketing programs. Its setup process makes it easy to get started, no matter how simple or intricate the program.

- Founded by Cioaca Virgil in 2017
- CEO: Cioaca Virgil
- Headquarters: Transylvania, Romania
- App integrations: Five
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: No
- Three plans, including starter, business, and enterprise
- Starting price: $49 monthly

Pros: customizable, handles VAT/Non-VAT invoicing, automated affiliate notifications, tax form collection, sub-affiliate option, two payment options, and supports 190 currencies

Cons: pricing is based on monthly revenue, limitations on plans, limited integrations, reporting for affiliates is insufficient, and software is prone to glitches

3. LeadDyno

LeadDyno's affiliate software is for businesses of all sizes. It has simple tools for those getting started and advanced options for enterprises. It integrates with the top ecommerce platforms, payment processors, CRMs, and email marketing apps. Merchants can preload content for social media sharing via the affiliate dashboard and send newsletters. The multi-level-marketing (MLM) feature incentivizes affiliates to recruit sub-affiliates for additional commissions.

- Cofounded by Mike Machado in 2014
- CEO: Mike Machado
- Headquarters: California, United States
- App integrations: 21
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: No
- Six plans, including starter, biz builder, accelerator, rainmaker, baller, and VIP
- Starting price: $49 monthly

Pros: affordable, customizable, and automated weekly activity reports

Cons: pricing is based on monthly visitors, the affiliate dashboard is ill-conceived with confusing naming conventions, and software updates are

infrequent

4. LinkMink

LinkMink offers affiliate marketing software for SaaS companies using Stripe. It handles recurring revenue, commissions, refunds, and payouts with ease. Merchants can automatically approve affiliates and assign them to different commission rates. LinkMink will process payments at no extra cost, beyond what PayPal charges.

- Founded by Ky Palmer and Philip Alexander in 2018
- CEO: Ky Palmer
- Headquarters: Idaho, United States
- App integrations: undisclosed
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: No
- Four plans, including starter, growth, business, and enterprise
- Starting price: $39 monthly

Pros: affordable, clean dashboards, and reporting is excellent

Cons: pricing is based on monthly revenue, limited features, limited or no customization options, doesn’t support marketing materials, undisclosed integra-

tions, and the website seems abandoned

5. Partnerize

Partnerize helps leading brands to build powerful partnerships that drive extra-ordinary growth. The Partnerize Partner Management Platform is an end-to-end, SaaS-based solution for forming, managing, analyzing, and predicting results using artificial intelligence.

Major brands in travel, retail, finance, and digital content rely on the Partnerize platform to drive customer acquisition, revenue increases, and profitability gains through their online marketing channels.

- Founded by Malcolm Cowley, Pete Cheyne, Sean Sewell in 2010
- CEO: Matt Gilbert
- Headquarters: Newcastle upon Tyne, England
- App integrations: 30+
- Free trial: Undisclosed
- Money-back guarantee: Undisclosed
- Plans: Undisclosed
- Price: Undisclosed

Pros: many integrations, makes payments to 200+ countries and territories, supports 60 currencies, and has solutions for marketers, agencies, and partners in different verticals

Cons: a confusing and convoluted UI, pricing is not available, and the website can be confusing for newbies

6. Post Affiliate Pro

Post Affiliate Pro lets you create and manage your affiliate program from top to bottom, with different commission structures, sub-affiliates, and settings. It supports multiple currencies, private campaigns, auto-approval, multilingual support, and smart links. It integrates with 200+ ecommerce, CMS, and payment apps.

- Founded in 2005
- CEO: Undisclosed
- Headquarters: Bratislava, Slovakia
- App integrations: 200+
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: No
- Two plans, including pro and ultimate
- Starting price: $97 monthly

Pros: feature-rich, satisfactory UI, many integrations, multiple tracking methods, customizable, and operating for 15+ years

Cons: pricing is based on tracking requests, extra costs for additional requests and features, the website doesn't have an about page (who works for the company?), some web pages are out-of-date, and the website looks abandoned

7. Refersion

Refersion helps online shops monitor sales from promoters, influencers, and affiliates. It simplifies the process of creating, growing, and analyzing your affiliate program. Merchants can track sales with referral links, coupon codes, emails, and SKUs.

- Launched by Alex Markov and Shibo Xu in 2015
- CEO: Alex Markov
- Headquarters: New York, United States
- App integrations: 30+
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: No
- Two plans, including professional and enterprise
- Starting price: $89 monthly

Pros: no overage fees and a free listing on Refersion's affiliate network

Cons: an inadequate affiliate dashboard, an antiquated reporting process, activity/click data isn't available, limited features and customizations, and a limit on sales tracked (130) for the base plan (130 seems overly random, why not 100 or 150?)

8. Tapfiliate

Tapfiliate enables you to create, track, and optimize your affiliate marketing and referral programs. It supports referral coupons, marketing materials, and shareable social media posts. Set one-time, recurring, fixed, percentage, category, and product commissions.

- Launched by Thomas van der Kleij in 2014
- CEO: Thomas van der Kleij
- Headquarters: Amsterdam, Netherlands
- App integrations: 30+
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: Yes
- Three plans, including essential, pro, and enterprise
- Starting price: $69 monthly

Pros: affordable, customizable, multiple commission types, and multilingual support

Cons: an overage fee for clicks and conversions, the dashboards and navigation are ill-designed, reporting is bulky, and some functions need improving

9. Tune

Tune builds technology to enable successful marketing partnerships. The Tune Partner Marketing Platform is a flexible SaaS platform for building, managing, and growing partner programs and networks. It targets DTC, financial, and subscription verticals. Tune “invented the postback,” the standard for cookie-less tracking on an app, mobile web, and desktop.

- Founded in 2009
- CEO: Cameron Stuart
- Headquarters: Seattle, United States
- App integrations: 20+
- Free trial: Yes
- Money-back guarantee: No
- Four plans, including bootstrap, startup, scale, and contract
- Starting price: $499 monthly

Pros: uses cookieless tracking

Cons: expensive, dashboards are confusing and clunky, limited customization, reporting is bulky, and deep linking is complicated

Affiliate Network Software

Affiliate networks are dynamic and comprehensive in their solutions. For those reasons, it's best to assess the pros and cons for yourself.

10. Awin

Awin's global affiliate marketing network empowers advertisers and publishers of all sizes to grow their businesses online. With over 20 years of experience, it's the result of mergers and acquisitions, including Affiliate Window, Zanox, affilinet, Commission Factory, and ShareASale. Its parent companies are Axel Springer and United Internet. The website supports 12 languages.

- Founded in 2000
- CEO: Mark Walters
- Headquarters: Baltimore, United States
- Merchants: 15,000+ (across Awin and ShareASale)

- Starting price: Undisclosed but expect an override and additional fees

11. CJ Affiliate

CJ Affiliate (formerly Commission Junction) is a global affiliate marketing network specializing in pay-for-performance programs that drive business results. It's dedicated to delivering innovative solutions and strategies designed to drive significant outcomes. CJ Affiliate is a part of the Publicis Media Groupe.

- Founded in 1998
- CEO: Mayuresh Kshetramade
- Headquarters: Santa Barbara, United States
- Merchants: 2,900+
- Starting price: $3,000 one-time + $3,000 deposit + $500 annual renewal + 30% override or a $500 monthly minimum + additional fees

12. FlexOffers

FlexOffers provides comprehensive solutions to advertisers and publishers via marketing tools, data delivery options, and advanced payment solutions through NET 7. Through their FlexRev-$hare program, affiliates can refer publishers and earn up to 50 percent of the profits made by FlexOffers.

- Founded in 2008
- CEO: Alex Daskaloff
- Headquarters: Florida, United States
- Merchants: 12,000+
- Starting price: $500 one-time + $100 escrow + 1% override on sales or a $25 monthly minimum

13. Impact

Impact was founded by a team of internet marketing and technology experts. Its mission is to deliver disruptive innovations in technology and performance marketing to help its clients successfully navigate the digital landscape. It has marketing solutions for advertisers, influencers, affiliates, mobile app developers, and marketing agencies.

- Founded in 2008
- CEO: David A. Yovanno
- Headquarters: Baltimore, United States
- Merchants: 1,600+
- Starting price: $1,000+ monthly

14. PartnerStack

PartnerStack enables companies to reach more customers through partnerships. It provides fast-growing companies and startups with the tools to build, manage, and scale channel partner programs.

- Founded in 2015
- CEO: Bryn Jones
- Headquarters: Toronto, Canada
- Merchants: 150+
- Starting price: $800 monthly + override on sales

15. Rakuten Advertising

Rakuten Advertising is a global provider of marketing, advertising, and technology services. Rakuten Advertising combines a unique media inventory, affiliate network, machine learning, and consumer insights to deliver results that increase brand awareness and marketing performance.

- Founded in 1996
- CEO: Nick Stamos
- Headquarters: San Mateo, United States
- Merchants: 2,100+
- Starting price: $2,500 one-time + a monthly fee based on clicks

16. ShareASale

ShareASale helps businesses grow by nurturing relationships, building innovative technologies, and guiding clients to affiliate marketing success.

- Founded in 2000
- CEO: Mark Walters
- Headquarters: Chicago, United States
- Merchants: 15,000+ (across Awin and ShareASale)
- Price: $550 one-time + 20% override on commissions or a $35 monthly minimum

Price Comparison

Standalone	Monthly Fee	Override	Overage Fee
iDevAffiliate	$39 – $59	0%	N/A
FirstPromoter	$49 – $149+	0%	N/A
LeadDyno	$49 – $349	0%	N/A
LinkMink	$39 – $125+	0%	N/A
Partnerize	no info	no info	no info
Post Affiliate Pro	$97 – $197	0%	Yes
Refersion	$89+	0%	N/A

Tapfiliate	$69 – $149+	0%	Yes
Tune	$499 – $1,500+	0%	N/A

Affiliate Network	Signup	Deposit	Monthly Minimum	Override
Awin	no info	no info	no info	no info
CJ Affiliate*	$3,000	$3,000	$500	30% on commissions
FlexOffers	$500	$100	$25	1% on sales
Rakuten Advertising	$2,500	N/A	N/A	Pay per click
ShareASale	$550	$100	$35	20% on commissions
Impact	$1,000+	N/A	N/A	no info but likely
PartnerStack	$800+	N/A	N/A	15% on commissions

*CJ Affiliate also charges an annual renewal fee of $500.

Recommendations

I'm not enthusiastic about any standalone affiliate marketing apps. Most of them feature unsatisfactory UIs and don't focus on the needs of affiliates. Regarding affiliate networks, Impact's clientele and software are the most impressive. It's risen to the top to become the platform of choice among fortune 500 companies. It comes at a premium and is suitable for affiliate programs that have the potential or do generate thousands monthly. For example, eBay moved its lucrative in-house program to Impact in 2019.

ShareASale is an excellent low-cost option for merchants in a variety of verticals. SaaS companies should explore Impact and iDevAffiliate. Shopify merchants can choose from several top-rated affiliate marketing apps. Lastly, developing in-house affiliate marketing software is an option that welcomes many advantages, including control, customization, privacy, and potentially lower costs.

An affiliate sales forecast of **greater** than $3,000 monthly = Impact

An affiliate sales forecast of **less** than $3,000 monthly = ShareASale, iDevAffiliate, or in-house software

*My recommendations don't account for marketing manager/staffing costs.

Software to Avoid

Avoid Refersion, Rewardful, Everflow, and ClickBank. Refersion, Rewardful, and Everflow are inadequate and ill-conceived. I refuse to partner with merchants that use them.

ClickBank is where get-rich-quick sellers, fake gurus, and ScamTubers (YouTubers who promote scams) go to sell whatever junk they can offload. For instance, software to create “AMAZING eBooks in 5 MINUTES Without Typing a Word!” is a featured product on the site. Furthermore, you’ll find very few, if any, reputable companies on ClickBank.

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